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Interview with Marvin (Monty) Roberts
 Date of Interview: June 1987 at Flag Is Up Farms, Buellflat
 Interviewer: Phyllis Lotz
 Transcriber: Phyllis Lotz

Begin Side 1, Tape 1

PL: Introduction

What brought you to the Santa Ynez Valley?

Mr. R: It was in late 1938 that I showed my first horse in competition and my father was in the horse business before me and I guess that set the pattern and I won. That set the pattern for what was to be for the rest of my life. I was born and raised in Salinas, California, went to grammar school there with my wife, Pat, and as time went on I showed a lot of horses coast to coast, I was on a train a lot with the box car with my horses. I had a tutor and a groom and here in California we showed out of a van a lot. We came to Santa Barbara, and to the Santa Ynez Valley to the Alisal Guest Ranch, to Lompoc, to Buellton, to the Glen Buell place, to Los Alamos, and every time I went through the Santa Ynez Valley I further renewed my intention of some day being here for good. In 1953 I graduated from high school and attended Hartnell College in Salinas and graduated from that school in 1955. I went to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo in 1955, and in 1956 Pat and I were married. We leased a piece of property there in San Luis and had a horse operation. Went to school at Cal Poly for 4 years. The reason for the four years was that I triple majored in Biological Science,

Agrobusiness, and Animal Science. Those three majors were without any question exactly what I needed to do what I am doing today. Flag Is Up Farm. Earlier in high school I had wanted to be a veterinarian like so many kids do and on a trip in 1950 to Davis I spent some time there at their vet school, and decided I didn't want to be a veterinarian. Veterinarians are doctors who work with maladies and sickness, I wanted to work with horses that were well and I vowed that I would have veterinarians working for me. I wanted to be on the horse side and they work on the medicine side, so consequently I moved away from that and went to Cal Poly and leased this piece of ground up there that was the base of our horse operation where I showed a lot of performance horses and halter horses in the show ring, quarter horses, Arabians, and some Thoroughbreds. All the time I had Thoroughbreds in training and when I came to San Luis I got the account to Steffle Brothers. It was Steffle Brothers Better Dairy Cows and they were in the business of buying and selling dairy cows but they loved Thoroughbred racing and I had enormous budgets to go out and buy yearlings for them where I could average as much as two thousand dollars per Thoroughbred yearling to buy and I would spend as much as twelve to fifteen thousand a year which was a mountain of money to me. We broke the babies for them and we prepared them for the race track and they had some significant successes and we also pre track trained for other people

but probably our number was like 250 to 300 performance horses showing horses at all times, and ten to fifteen Thoroughbreds. Then in 1961 through my veterinarian I met the Harcourt Family based here in the Santa Ynez Valley and it was decided that we would change the thrust more into the Thoroughbred thing. When Mr. Harcourt said he wanted a major Thoroughbred operation and do it right, he said to me, "where would you like to be if you had your choice to anywhere in the world." And I said that I would like it right here and he was surprised at that, I told him that I had made that decision 15 to 20 years ago, that the Santa Ynez Valley was the place. We did start looking for property here and started in 1961. Flag Is Up Farm was born, but did not have a home yet. We looked at property and by 1965 we started buying up property here where we are now on Buellflat. In 1966 we started construction and moved in in late 1966. In 1962 when I first met Mr. Harcourt, we kept most of our Thoroughbreds on the Home Ranch, of Tom Parks, out here west of Buellton and it was one of the few Thoroughbred operations in the Santa Ynez Valley at that time. Young Harcourt had a place called Hillview Ranch up at the corner of Roblar and Brinkerhoff, out of Santa Ynez, and originally Mr. Harcourt had kept a few horses out there but it was not as good a place, the soil was not as good for pasture. We came over to Parks place and we kept a lot of babies there until we actually moved to Flag Is Up.

PL: How much acreage did you finally have?

Mr. R: In 1966 we bought several parcels and by the end of that year the ranch had about 400 acres. By the end of 1968 it was 1200 acres and it was all contiguous. It was branching out and buying contiguous parcels. But the 1250 acres was essentially still a 500 to 600 horse farm and the rest was purchased for real estate speculation. In 1972 we broke up that partnership completely and I took the center portion for myself. Mr. Harcourt spun off all those surrounding acres and I have close to 200 acres now.

PL: When you speak of showing a horse, what does that involve?

Mr. R: Well, I show cutting horses, stock horses, hunters and jumpers, I ride in races, show gated horses, three gates and four gates, and five. I showed at lot in junior and youth competition through high school and then showed pretty early in rodeo competition too, so it involved a lot of things. The quarter horse shows in the American Horse Association shows I have a judges card since 1950 on. One time I had the most cards that anyone had in the American Horse Assoc., and I judged Arabians, Thoroughbreds, judged jumpers and hunter divisions and the gated division.

PL: What is the card you speak of?

Mr. R: Approval to judge, approval by the American Horse Association to be a qualified judge. And you have to be

recommended for that card and they they study your qualifications and what you have done and they either give you a card or not. And I held cards in the broader base than any one else for several years there. I have turned them all in now but there was a time when I judged something like twelve separate divisions for the American Horse Assoc. It gives you a broad base in education in horsemanship.

FL: And it came naturally for you because of your father?

Mr. R: Yes, I had a thing where in fact currently studying a lot on the psychological phenomenon that causes that relationship between a horse and a man, and I am one to believe firmly that there is no born feeling. For a long time I did feel that there were people that had this natural ability with horses but I don't think that now and I appreciate what you are saying, yes, it was a natural thing for me to go into the training of horses and to live with horses as it was natural because of the position of my father and what he was doing but I don't think God gave me any natural instincts to do anything with a horse and I don't think God has given anyone such a talent. I'm not sure but I am leaning towards that concept. Had I been born to a bus driver in the middle of Manhattan, I don't think I would have found my way to a horse but I have taken a lot of young people and determined that they have absolutely no connection with a horse what so ever and in

fact were very frightened and not at all natural or at ease around a horse and done some things with them that have proved to me that it does not come natural but you can develop that skill.

PL: Do you still take young people and teach them to be jockeys?

Mr. R: Not so much, the government has pretty much put us out of the business as far as doing that. It's a shame too, but what with minimum wage laws and insurance, the terrible litigation mentality of this nation it is almost impossible. From time to time I do experiments and I choose a young person and make arrangements with the parents of that young person and work out something but it is not anything like a formal schooling.

PL: Doesn't it seem that girls are more useful on a horse farm, and why is that?

Mr. R: Absolutely. I think there is a multitude of reasons for that. Certainly in the Thoroughbred industry a lot of the boys that would otherwise get on a horse outgrow it and society in general has outgrown the horse business (When Mr. Roberts speaks of "outgrown," I think he is referring to the fact that young Americans are growing taller and heavier than in years past, and there is a weight problem for a jockey these days). In a million years or so the girls will be too big to ride out Thoroughbreds and we

will have to go to Orientals or Hispanics or Pigmys to keep the weight down. But the girls naturally weigh less than the boys, given through their 20's when they are still young enough to be athletically active in the area of riding and heal quickly so that the bumps and bruises aren't so tramatic as they are when you get into your 40's. So the boys out grow it and not only that, we are going through a very difficult time, nobody would deny this, in discovering what really ought to happen with the raising of our young people. When I say raising of our young people I don't mean that we put them in a pen somewhere and raise them as you do cattle, I am using the term to canote that relationship that parents have with their offspring where by that offspring moves from infancy to childhood through prbearty, though adulthood, and all the enviremental circumstances that cause the development of that child and one of the great problems of today is this business of how liberal or how little discipline, how much discipline does this child need. These young boys apparently seem to be considerably more aggressive as we become more permissive, the boys are more aggressive in their attitude and so they are the first to jump out there and want a car and want to date and this and that, but the girls have a bit more tranquil attitude, not as aggressive when treated permissively and the boys it seems in the ages of 14 through 25 lets say, so the girls seem to migrate to the more tranquil things and they love horses

in general and also they are the right size. All of these things go together and you wind up with 12 riders and 8 of them are girls and you go to the horse shows and you look in the Western Equitation Class and there are 62 kids and only 3 of them are boys, it's amasing.. Even in rodeo the girls have insisted they get their own events now and there are more and more of the on the road paying more and more money to buy horses to compete on. I think it's great! But I'm not one to advocate the competition of young ladies with men. That really bothers me and it does not bother me from the standpoint that I don't think the girls are not good enough to mix with men, that's not the point at all, for instance in our industry where you put a girl in a race with tough young men and she wants to be treated equally, she does not want them to give her concessions and it is a tough sport, it can cause instant death at any time and I think that the chance for permanent injury, the chance of defacing injury is much too great, I don't like to see the girls in there. Placed in a position where her life and limb is in jeopardy as the boys are tough. It's incredible, I've been in the "jocks" room when, now they have separate facilities, but when they came to get together and get ready to go to their horses and you see the toughest young lady who is riding right now, to see her in a tee shirt and a pair of shorts for instance, which is perfectly moral to see her that way, her body is exposed to the point that you can

assess her physical fitness and see her standing next to a young man like Leffy (Lafayette) Pincay or Eddie Delehousey. Those boys are aare so muscular and so tough and this little sold thing has to compete on ann equal basis just doesn't make sense. The best female competing can not compete with the worst male competeing.

FL: How did you happen to choose the Thoroughbred to train?

Mr. R: Well...the Thoroughbred while he is a beautiful individual like his blood lines are the basis of everything that we do in the world in western performance horses and I really have come to appreciate the cutting horse and the reins cow horse, as real world class athletes, the Thoroughbreds are incredible and when you get further from the Thoroughbred you get a less effective horse, there is no question about that. Docbar, for instance, for the last 15 years has rewritten the record books in the cutting horse industry and it is incredible that his stamp will not be completely eliminated from the cutting horse industry for 150 years, maybe 200 years. He is by Lightbar, wh/o is by Threebar, a straight Thoroughbred and he is ;out of a mare that was half Thoroughbred so you ;know we are living with Thoroughbreds all the time but I like them because of the temperment and I could sit here and tell you emotionally and esthically why I like the Thoroughbred but the bottom line is that it is basically the ;only breed of horse where the public, the populace in

general of the United States is reaching into their pockets to support this industry. It is an industry where without the public participation through maramutual wager, it would fall apart by the tune of maybe, 80%. The other 20% is the Arabian industry, the Morgan industry, the quarter horse industry. If you are going to be successful and if you want to support a life style that's ambitious and certainly comfortable as you can see looking around you here (a very beautiful, lavious home) that's what the Thoroughbred is affording us, then you had better get where the money is and while I love the horse, that's the bottom line.

PL: Do you have any particular studs now on the ranch that you are using for breeding?

Mr. R: We stand 12 stallions here so we are a major breeding operation here in California, one of the largest and we bred 450 mares last year to our stallions so the answer is yes, we are a major stallion standing and breeding operation. We have Anglelight here, who is only one of two horses to beat Secretariate. We just received My Habitony the other day and he is going to start his breeding career here, we have Nanteguos who is an undefeated Irish horse who is beautifully bred and d;oiing very well. And Formula One, and other stallions and we also stand one quarter horse who was twice the worlds champion halter horse here. He is doing just great, he

has two world championships.

PL: Do you own these stallions?

Mr. R: I own parts of them, as much as half and as little as 4/40ths.

PL: If a person knows that you have Formula One here and he/she wants to go into racing he brings his mare here and then you take over the birth and training?

Mr. R: It works in as many different ways as there are horses. There is always some subtle differences in the relationship with an owner. But we have owners that send mares here to bea bred to the stallion and the mare lives here and we raise the baby, and they race the baby and do everything as simple as possible, then there are situations where they will send the mare and she lived here and all but they will put the baby in a sale and not race it. And then there are situations where they pput them through a sale with the opportunity to see it if the price is high enough and then sell and then there are situations where they own a share in the stallion and they breed on that share and they own part of the stallion as well as the mare and all sorts of complicated relationships.

PL: So there are all kinds of complicated arrangements in raising a foal?

Mr. R: Yeh, a lot of complications, in fact there is foal sharing where someone, say I own a share of the stallion and I breed the mare and the mare owner gets half the foal and I get half, we have this plan for it, I mean there are all kinds of sophisticated sorts of plans.

PL: Have you had many successful foals?

Mr. R: Yeh, we just simply would not be here, let me say this... that often times where you see an operation such as this, you can bet yourself that there is outside money coming in to support this and when I say outside money I mean money from some manufacturing business, from some oil business, from some unrelated to the horse business. This particular operation lives or dies on the horse business. I have never had an outside income, the horse business has been my entire life from childhood so if I,...if you see this and all that it means, this farm, the whole place, and I am not producing winners, you just simply are not going to see it for long and I have been here 21 years now and we believe we are survivors. I have not brought a dime into this operation from other industries except in the form of client dimes.

PL: Could I give you some names of your neighbors, and you tell me about these people? Peggie Gardner?

Mr. R: Peggie Gardner...the salt of the earth. She is a breed of her own. I was just having a conversation with someone

this morning about how too bad it is that the world is moving away from a time when you could shake hands with someone and it was done and you could rely on their word and we did not need it in writing. You would know that they would perform with out question and Peggie Gardner is one of those people. Furthermore, Peggie Gardner goes one more than that, she will reach out, not will she agree to do what she has stated but she will reach out to do more, Peggie and I don't see eye to eye on every issue, we have our differences but they are honest differences and I respect her opinions on anything she has an opinion on. Most of the time we are alike. Peggie Gardner falls in with people like Glen Cornelius and his son, Ray, with people like George Smith, Cottonwood Ranch, There was a time in the United States when almost everyone relied on the work of their friends and associates to do what they agreed on. Peggie Gardner is the last of that era.

PL: Tom Parks?

Mr. R: Tom Parks was a very successful farmer, great guy, he was a character. I knew him in the autumn of his life, but he looked to fun, he had his teams that he had lots of fun with, his little place (The Home Ranch, west of Buellton) was set up so that he enjoyed every minute of it.

End of Side 1, Tape 1

Begin Side 2, Tape 1

It wasn't terribly fancy that it was an albatross for him, he made a good deal of money in the farming industry and so he was able to do that. Racing in the Thoroughbred industry was never a terrible need for him to succeed in that and consequently he succeeded very well but he did not go at it in a commercial way or an intense way, he took a pretty laid back attitude toward the Thoroughbred industry. He too did what he would say...Tom Parks had a peculiar idiosyncrasy in my opinion,, in that if a deal did not go as he thought it should, he would give it away, walk away. Instead of rescuing it for what it was worth, what value it had to him, he would walk away. He was that kind of a guy that just did not want to get dramatically involved, you know. He questioned, he was a pretty traditional sort of guy, he questioned new innovations quite intensely and there in we differed greatly because I tend to open up to new innovations and wonder and try to discover but Tom Parks did not want to deal with that at all. It was just an idiosyncrasy that Tom had.

PL: Vince Evans? (Mr. Roberts was visibly upset when I asked about Mr. Evans)

Mr. R: Vincent B. Evans was one of my closest friends, Vince Evans was a dynamic person, he was certainly controversial he did a lot of things in his life and some of those things were successful and some were not. When Vince Evans walked into a room regardless of whether it was a

meeting to determine to get out of something that went wrong that he had been unsuccessful with or whether it was a success, everybody in the room realized that he was a leader. He was our paternal guide light in this valley for many years and it was very unfortunate that he was killed so abruptly (Vince Evans, his wife, his daughter were killed in an airplane crash, near Buellton, during a storm in 1982) and so early he had more years to give. I think we all had more to gain from him. There are those in the valley, for instance Peggie Gardner, who you just asked about, and Vince Evans fought like cats and dogs, and felt very stretched to find common ground and yet they both respected each other greatly and I stood in the middle, in love with them both. Vince Evans probably influenced my career from 1966 to until he died, more than anyone else even people in my industry. I found myself when building, changing, remodeling, doing anything on this place saying to myself without fail, "what would Vince think about this?" He was my hero, he was my mentor, Vince Evans helped me a lot, we joined a lot of things together, putting on events and things like that. He was a mile a minute, foot on the floor, always going, guy. He was certainly not without his detractors, when you go at life that way you naturally bump into people. We worked to support the Theaterfest, worked on the "Reagan Roundup," started Derby Days West, all sorts of things. We flew to his restaurants and I would put in my

two cents worth and he came to the Thoroughbred sales at Del Mar. I never got him into the Thoroughbred business because I did not want to, you know, we were just good friends.

PL: Lets talk about the sales, do you always go?

Mr. R: That's my life, thats how I make a living, I sell horses at public auction to make a living, I live with my horses for five weeks each year for the March Two Year Old Sale and that is my living. The farm has never made any money since it's inception and Thoroughbred farms in general don't make money, if it breaks even that's the best I can expect, if it holds the land together and there is some appreciation down the line there might be some money to go fishing with but basically I make my annual income by selling horses that I have purchased as yearlings. In March I sell them, I purchase in July, August, and September of the previous year and sell in March.

PL: What does the future hold for you?

Mr. R: No crystal ball! I don't know, I know each day I have to make my decisions based on what that day tells me. I heard a philosopher just recently say that you can keep your life straight if you just decide that there are two things to worry about, Yesterday and Tomorrow!. And maybe he has a point, we all have to worry about tomorrow in some way and we should learn from yesterday, I think this

industry is going to come back, it is going to get bigger than ever in the valley but we have over produced ourselves, we have over producted I think and we have learned from that, I think we are coming back. I hope that I survive until we come back and when we do I want to be bigger and better than even, I want to get property for less money somewhere near here to run a good deal more horses on and change the thrust of this particular operation a little bit, but I don't know, I'll go a day at a time and try to go with the business in what direction it goes. Every day there are changes, I woke up this morning to learn that the government had changed the rules just yesterday in the House of Representatives. They passed an immigration bill that will change the horse farm hiring practices and I have to think about that. It changes what I might do. The tax reform may change what we do, I don't know. I started a company to create limited partnerships, now the tax reform looks like it will put limited partnerships out of business. Everyday it changes and to tell you what is in store for the future, I can't. All I can tell you is that in my future is the intention to give 110% every day to try to make it better and more successful an operation, to try to produce better horses, that run faster, that stay sounder, I have fun with that, and thats my future.

PL: How can you have a horse run faster?

Mr. R: They are breaking records every day...

PL: There must be a limit?

Mr R: Is there? I don't know... for generations they didn't think they could break the 4 minute mile in humans, sure there is a limit, obviously a native born horse for the next million years is not going to break the sound barrier so there are some limits and all you are talking about is being there first. So it's doing a better job than the next guy, getting up earlier and staying up later, I suppose. I don't know any way to make things better for yourself.

PL: Thank you for this time, I know how busy you are.
End of interview.